

and all the memories i wished away (they stayed) by meliebee

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Angst, Anyways, Emotional Hurt/Comfort, F/M, GIVE ME SOFT MAX AND WILL OR GIVE ME DEATH, Gen, I just want more about mike and max... my needs are simple, It Gets Worse Before It Gets Better, Max Mayfield-Centric, Minor Maxine "Max" Mayfield/Lucas Sinclair, Post-Season/Series 02, Sensory Overload, Yikes, i have no idea how to tag this, listen I've been a 13 year old girl and BOY is it a trip, max feels, max has ALL the feels, max is loved, max is sad and then she's mad and then she's okay!!, mentions of like, no editing we die like men, something about max and el just really touched me, theres SO MUCH POTENTIAL, this is like 90 percent self-projection

Language: English

Characters: Billy Hargrove, Dustin Henderson, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Susan Hargrove, Will Byers

Relationships: Eleven | Jane Hopper/Mike Wheeler (slight), Maxine "Max" Mayfield & Mike Wheeler, Maxine "Max" Mayfield/Lucas Sinclair, Will Byers & Eleven | Jane & Dustin Henderson & Maxine Mayfield & Lucas Sinclair & Mike Wheeler

Status: Completed

Published: 2018-05-14

Updated: 2018-05-14

Packaged: 2022-04-22 04:48:46

Rating: General Audiences

Warnings: No Archive Warnings Apply

Chapters: 1

Words: 4,867

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

They're searching the school for Dustin's weirdass pet, and Lucas is telling her a story about magic girls and bad men, and Steve Harrington is swinging a bat and Max is screaming, and there's paper all over the Byers house and Max learns this is the furthest thing from normal. Max learns a lot about her new friends very quickly.

(What the hell has she gotten herself into? But it's too late to back down now.)

and all the memories i wished away (they stayed)

Author's Note:

YIKES this is. this is so messy. i dont even? know??
this isn't even what i wanted to write about,, self-
projection who is she....

YIKES ANYWAYS i hope this is okay!!! be gentle with
my angry daughter i love her

Max learns a lot about her new friends, very quickly. When she'd first met them, *(two boys following her and oh god they're probably those creeps from earlier why won't they just leave her alone what the hell)* she'd thought they were weird, and quirky, and honestly kind of lame, but still *normal*. She'd thought they were normal. She'd had no reason to believe otherwise.

The other kids at school called that one kid with the bowl cut *zombie boy*, and Max had thought *okay, weird*, but kids are cruel and that was nothing new. Dustin and Lucas stuck together with a strange determination, even under the bickering, like they knew that even if they had nothing else they had each other. Mike was a mess, protective and strangely guarded, and Max remembers thinking *why the hell does he act like he's in charge of anything? This is middle school, not Vietnam*.

They were weird kids, but still normal kids.

Then suddenly they're searching the school for Dustin's weirdass pet, and Lucas is telling her a story about magic girls and bad men, and Steve Harrington is swinging a bat and Max is screaming, and there's paper all over the Byers house and Max learns *this is the furthest thing from normal*. Max learns a lot about her new friends very quickly.

She learns that Lucas is brave, stupidly so. They all are. She learns that when the wind rustles tree branches outside, he reaches for a slingshot with practiced fingers and hard eyes, wearing an expression that tells her this isn't the first time. She learns that Dustin's brain works faster than his mouth, that when he's stressed he twists his

fingers together, that he looks at the door every few minutes with something like paranoia, but his words are fierce and determined. She learns that Mike has earned the leadership he carries like a cloak, reckless and quick-thinking, brushing off every trauma with a single-minded drive while still considering all the others in his party. She learns that Will deserves a hell of a lot better than what he's dealing with, but his family and friends are going to war for him.

She learns that they're the farthest thing from normal, and yet—"God," says Max, because *shouldn't someone be screaming in shock by now?* Shouldn't Lucas be avoiding her, after her terrible awful piece-of-shit stepbrother tried to smash his brains in? Instead, Lucas takes her hand and pulls her after the others, telling her to ignore Mike's harsh words because he's got the best heart of anyone Lucas knows. Shouldn't Dustin be terrified, scared out of his mind after his Amazing Scientific Discovery ate his cat? Instead, Dustin squares his shoulders and hands Steve his bat and tells them everything he knows about what they're facing, making sure Max can follow along. Shouldn't Mike be beyond traumatised, arriving back at the Byers house from the lab with shoes that have blood on the soles and half-carrying a sobbing Joyce with him? Instead, Mike sprouts ideas and plans from his mouth like a fountain, speaking of fire and ways to help the others, offering himself as a distraction just to buy the others more time.

Max looks at them all and wonders what the hell she's gotten herself into. But it's too late to back down now, Lucas is holding her hand and the floor is dented from where she threatened Billy and her heart is running a mile a minute to the pace of Mike's instructions. She looks around at the people beside her and thinks *I trust them*. She tries to believe that she means it.

She hadn't been expecting an apology. Like, okay, she hadn't been expecting a lot of things that happened, (another dimension and a real-life superhero, to start,) but apologies? They were up there, right with telekinesis and fighting Billy.

When Mike slumps down beside her, his back sliding the wall, Max doesn't look at him, trying not to stiffen her spine. He doesn't say anything, just leans his head against the wall, still coated in Will's

map, and Max shoves her hands into the pockets of her jacket.

“Hey,” he says eventually, voice croaky. Max slides her eyes over to him and brings her legs up to her chest, leaning her chin on her knees. She doesn’t reply.

“You okay?” Max stares at him, brow furrowed, but Mike seems to be too tired to notice. His feet leave faint red imprints everywhere he walks, but no one’s asked him where the blood came from so Max won’t be the first. “Max?”

Max shakes off her disbelief and shrugs half-heartedly. “Fine.”

Mike’s head lolls on the wall and he meets her eyes. He looks exhausted, worn down to the bones. There’s Upside Down gunk on his shoulders and dusting his hair. “Really?” He pushes off the wall a bit with this elbow, sitting up straighter. “Last year, uh... well. It’s okay to be, you know, freaked out.”

Max raises an eyebrow. Of all the things she could say, all the things burning a hole through her tongue, she blurts out: “Why do you even care?” Then she winces, quickly enough that if it was Billy he wouldn’t have noticed, but it’s not Billy, it’s Mike.

He frowns, but looks find of embarrassed, raising a hand to rub the back of his neck and then run through his hair. “That’s fair,” he says after a moment. “Um.” He steels himself visibly and moves his head to look her in the eyes again. “I’m sorry for the way I treated you. That wasn’t fair to you, and... I was a dick.” He shrugs, self-depreciatingly and kind of uncomfortably. “I’m sorry.”

He blows out a puff of air from his lips and leans back further against the wall. “You don’t have to, like, forgive me or whatever. Just, uh... I’m not always an asshole, I promise, and you didn’t deserve all that shit. So. I’m really, genuinely sorry.”

Max stares at him, mouth open, legs still drawn to her chest. She has no idea what she’d have said to that, because right when the silence is pushing her to speak, they hear a truck driving up the drive way of the Byer’s house, and they’re both scrambling to their feet in an instant.

It doesn't stop her from wondering, though, in the days that follow. Her house is weirdly quiet, now, with Billy avoiding the hell out of everyone, and her mom absent as ever. She'd gotten used to hearing the boys, too, which is stupid, since she probably doesn't mean shit to them, but. It is what it is. She stares at the ceiling and she wonders what she would've said to Mike Wheeler's apology.

Lucas shows up at her window two days after they'd all been dropped out at their respective houses by Joyce.

"You shouldn't be here," Max hisses, leaning out of her window, but Lucas just grins at her, that idiot. Max looks back at her door, paranoid, but Lucas is still just grinning at her and Max curses to herself.

"Hold on," she mutters, "I'm coming down."

"We're meeting at Mike's," Lucas half-shouts. Max's hair flies behind her in a red curtain, her arms wound around his waist, the material of his jacket surprisingly soft against her skin. She hates herself for feeling so safe around him. She can hear her mother already: *you barely know him, Maxine! What if someone sees, Maxine!* She hates that even in her head, her mother doesn't know her well enough to drop that awful name.

"Okay," Max shouts back, and Lucas turns his head somewhat, so she can see his grin. Max gets distracted, staring at his smile and the way his eyes crinkle at the corners, and—snap *out* of it, Max. The wind is blowing in her face, but Lucas is smiling, and the bike feels strangely sturdy, and Mike buries her face in Lucas' jacket to drown out the voices in her head.

Mike throws open the door.

"Lucas," he greets, sounding weirdly relieved and somewhat exhausted. His eyes flit to her face. "Max."

Max stays silent, but Lucas shoulders past Mike like he's used to

Mike's chaotic energy, which. He probably is. Max follows him, less boldly, and Mike closes the door behind him.

"Mom!" Max jumps a bit at Mike's volume, sending him a glance from over her shoulder, but he must not see her because he shouts again a second later. "Lucas and Max are here!" He doesn't get a reply, but he doesn't seem bothered, and he gestures for them to head downstairs.

Lucas follows easily, no problem, but Max can't stop herself from hesitating. This is The Basement. The Basement where everything happened, last year. El's Basement. And, now that she thinks of it, she has no idea what they're doing here. Lucas hadn't said, and she'd somehow forgotten to ask, and she can't stop the stupid, insecure doubts from creeping in. What if they're just making her come along to cut her off from the group for good?

"Hey." Mike, at the first stair. "You coming?"

Max jerks her eyes up to his face, hoping her cheeks aren't heating up. "Uh, yeah. Sorry."

Mike shrugs, turning back towards the basement, and Max takes in the tense set of his shoulders, the way his eyes aren't focussing on any one thing, and she shouldn't but she can't stop herself: "Are you, uh, okay?"

Mike stops, pauses, and leans against the wall of the stairway. "Yeah," he replies easily. "You?"

Max thinks about how her house feels empty, how her chest feels hollow, how her fingers itch for Steve's bat if only so she can chase away the shadows in her bedroom. She thinks about how she feels safer just from being around Lucas, about any of them, and how much she loathes being home yet fears what's outside. "Yeah," she mutters, and brushes past him to take the first steps down to the basement. Mike lets her go.

It turns out that what they're doing is called Dungeons and Dragons, and it's so dumb. It's the nerdiest thing Max has ever heard of and

she's embarrassed *for* them, because apparently they all collectively lost a *lot* of brain cells in the Upside Down and aren't capable of common sense.

"Oh my god," she groans. "This is why you call yourselves the party. Oh my god. This is awful. You're awful. I hate this." Will looks uncertain, soft and gentle like he always does, and Max wonders if she'd gone too far, *nice one, Maxine*, but Dustin cackles.

"Sucks for you, Max," Mike declares. "You're part of the party, and that means D&D." Max shoots her head up to see if he's being serious, but he looks too virtuous to be malicious, and she finds herself staring.

"Yeah, Max," Dustin chortles. "Party rules."

Max shakes her head, horrified. "I knew you were nerds," she allows, "but this? It's a whole 'nother level."

"Oh, so you don't want Will to draw your character?" Dustin's voice is *way* too innocent for Max to tolerate, and Max narrows her eyes at him, but Will looks... too small. She barely knows them, Max reminds herself, *you barely know him, Max*. Still, she can't help herself from agreeing to at least hear the rules, if only to make Will take up just a bit more space. He's so *small*.

She hates that she feels like she has to protect him, because he'd hate that and he's hardly delicate, and she barely knows him, but it's probably a fair reaction to have and at least she's not alone. Mike's side is physically attached to Will's the whole time, and Lucas reaches over sporadically to bump fists every time he rolls a good number, and Dustin asks him for his opinion whenever he can't decide what to do. At least, Max thinks in a moment of silence, Will has these people who love him so vibrantly, fiercely, these people who brag about his drawings for him and rub his shoulders when he shivers. At least he has that.

She gets nightmares, sometimes. They're not, like, nightmares of the demodogs or the upside down or whatever, but there's sensations, a feeling of moss in her throat, and the sky is closing in on her, and she

wakes up with eyes wide open and shaking fists clenched. Sometimes she can get back to sleep. Most times she can't. She sits in the middle of her bed, curling and uncurling her fingers, and tries to calm to frantic noise in her head.

Sometimes she debates crawling out of the window and running, going to wander the empty roads and relishing in the silence. Sometimes she wishes she could visit Lucas. Or Dustin, or Mike even if just to fight with someone real and tangible. She'd even settle for Will, as little as she knows him.

She never does, obviously. She sits on her bed, pointedly does not look in the corners of her room, chews on her lip and jumps at the sound of branches brushing against her window.

It's been almost three weeks since everything and Max feels jumpy and angry and *tense*. She's been sleeping even less than usual, and Neil's shouting wakes her up on the nights that she can. Little sounds grate on her senses and the touch of her jacket on her skin scratches in a way that Max has never felt before. Her mom is getting yelled at and Neil is getting louder.

When she's snapped at Dustin for the third time in lunch, barely even caring that *they're probably going to kick you out, god Maxine you just can't do anything right*, she notices Mike staring at her. She narrows her eyes. He looks a bit surprised that she's meeting his gaze, but he isn't looking away and the eye contact is making Max squirm. She bites into her apple with a particular viciousness and Lucas shoots her looks from across the table.

"What, Lucas, Jesus?" Lucas jumps. Max glares harder. "Wanna say something, stalker?" Stalker doesn't sound so nice, right now. It's sounds angry and accusing and pretty much how Max feels. Lucas shakes his head quickly, looking more than a little wounded, but Max buries the feelings she doesn't want to feel right now (*guilt so much guilt I'm sorry Lucas*) and eats her apple moodily. The rest of the day passes in a haze of irritation and anger, and Max rubs the skin under her eyes and wants to scream.

"Hey." Mike is waiting for her. Max rolls her eyes and shoves past

him so roughly that he actually stumbles, but she doesn't even have time to feel bad because he just spins loosely on his feet so he's walking by her side.

She doesn't look at him, hoping he'll leave, but of course he doesn't, because he's *stupid*. She shoves past students, leaving Mike weaving awkwardly through them, heading outside where she kept her skateboard this morning. She doesn't want a ride with Billy, not today.

"Hey! Max!" Mike is still following her. Idiot.

"Go away!"

She can hear his feet, running up towards her, but she tugs her skateboard out with more force than necessary and turns away.

"Max!" She's not going to look at him, she's not. She wishes he'd just leave her alone, he had no problem doing just that only a few weeks ago. "Really, are you just gonna zoom away?"

Max throws a finger in the air, eyes stinging. Mike mutters some quiet curse and then he's running up to her again, faster this time, fast enough that Max doesn't have time to jump on her board and leave him in the dust.

"Max, hey, Max." His fingers are on her shoulders, now. "I didn't mean that. C'mon, Max, what's going on? Lucas is worried."

Max yanks her body away from him, pivoting to leave, but she makes the mistake of looking at Mike's face and he looks really, genuine concerned. Concerned and kind of hurt and a lot sorry. They're standing just outside the school parking lot, and the students behind them chatter noisily. Their voices all sound so violent to Max's ears.

"Max," he implores, his hands reaching out seemingly subconsciously but careful not to touch her again. "What's going on? You can talk to us, y'know? You can talk to me." He pauses, uncertain. "You can talk to Dustin, or... or *Lucas*, and—"

"I don't *want* to talk to Lucas," Max blurts, catching them both by surprise.

“Oh,” says Mike, scrambling, “uh, okay, that’s okay... um, why don’t you want to talk to Lucas?”

Max brushes angrily under her eyes. “He doesn’t *get it*,” she snaps. Her hand scratches at her wrist, already red and irritated.

“Okay,” Mike answers. “Have you tried talking to him?” Max glares at him. Mike wilts a bit under it, but his back is still straight. “Sure. Well, what’s going on?”

Max curls her fists, focusses on her board in her hands and is torn between the urge to fight and the urge to run away. “I don’t *know*,” she growls instead, hating how watery her voice sounds. “Everything is just—everything is just *hard*—” She’s shaking, trembling, and Mike’s arms are encircling her before the first sob has even left her mouth.

“Hey,” he’s saying, “hey, hey. You’re okay.” Her skateboard dropped, somewhere in between her outburst and Mike hugging her, and her hands fist into the back of his sweater. It’s ridiculously soft.

“It’s not,” Max chokes. “It’s *not* okay.”

Mike’s arms squeeze tighter. “Yeah.” He sounds more subdued when he replies. “Yeah, it’s not.” He takes a long breath. “But, uh. It will be. Trust me.”

And she doesn’t trust him, she shouldn’t and she doesn’t, but... her tears slow. (Today it’s not even about, like, Billy, or Neil, or home. It’s about the shadows that are following her and the growls she hears from trashcans and the way she can’t comprehend how her life has become so convoluted.) He doesn’t pull back until she does, and when she wipes at her face he doesn’t say anything. (Max is *losing her mind*. Today, and yesterday, and the day before. She’s sinking before she even realised she’d been struggling to stay afloat.) He hands her the skateboard and tells her that if she needs somewhere to go, for whatever reason, his house is just a few streets away.

“We all care, Max.” His voice is gentle but not condescending. Max doesn’t look at him, but it’s not because she’s angry. “All of us. Just because we don’t understand, right now, doesn’t mean we don’t

care.” He reaches out to squeeze her shoulder. “We’re here for you if you’ll let us be.”

Max nods, jerkily, and she can hear the soft exhale he makes before turning back towards the school. She’s not ever had this, this kind of heart-to-heart. This, the peace caring, the hands-on shoulders and smiles meant to reassure. Not just with Mike, but, like ever. Her mom loves her, but she doesn’t... actively care. And, well, Billy and Neil aren’t even in the same hemisphere.

From the edges of her eyes she can see him about to re-enter the parking lot, and then — “Mike!” He turns. She opens her mouth, to say *thank you or piss off or I’m fine* or something, anything, but words fail her.

Mike smiles anyway.

Billy’s car pulls up in front of her. The window rolls down. “Are you coming?” He sounds angry, like always, but also kind of nervous. Good. Max doesn’t care if it’s out of fear of Neil’s wrath or if it’s respect for her or *whatever. Whatever.*

She looks at him evenly for a second, takes a breath, and nods.

That night, she doesn’t go to Mike’s. She doesn’t go to Lucas’ either, or Dustin’s. She stays home, and she takes a nap. Her mom wakes her up for dinner, and Max gets up without a word. Dinner is spaghetti, Neil makes a comment every few minutes, Max’s mom makes a reply every few minutes, and Max doesn’t say a thing. She doesn’t look at Billy, either.

After they’re excused, Billy blocks the door to her room. He narrows his eyes at her. “What the hell is your problem?” He still sounds angry, but it’s emptier now. Angry but also freaked out.

“Screw you,” Max says flippantly, even-toned, and uses his confusion to shove open her door and close it in his face.

Later, when Max’s mom comes to say goodnight, she sits on the edge of Max’s bed. She reaches out with a hand and brushes Max’s hair out

of her face. Max leans into her hand. "How are you holding up?"

Max shrugs.

Susan frowns, smoothing her hand over Max's forehead and letting it fall into her lap.

Max looks at her, her mother with her soft eyes and worried lips, and says, "I've made friends."

"Oh! Girls?" Susan looks surprised, which stings a bit but it's fair, and hopeful, which stings just as much for some unknown reason.

Max shakes her head.

Susan tilts her head, reaching out to hold Max's hand in her own. Max wonders if Billy said anything to Neil. "Okay," she says, bravely, and Max can hear the way she's trying to hide her apprehension from her daughter.

"I'm proud of you, Maxie. I know..." She lets go of Max's hand and presses her skirt down nervously. "I know this move has been hard."

Max thinks of demodogs, and the smell of blood and smoke, and standing in a defensive circle with nothing to guard her but her fists. She thinks of riding behind Lucas on his bike, and Dustin asking her to go trick-or-treating with them, and Mike and Will holding hands. She thinks of Eleven with blood dripping from her nose, seeping from her ears and painted underneath her eyes.

"Yeah," she says eventually, and Susan's lips press together in a sympathetic smile.

"Thank you for trying so hard," Susan murmurs. *With Neil, and Billy, and me.* Max thinks, *I don't have a choice.* Max thinks, *yeah, okay. Thank you for noticing.*

Susan leans forward to kiss Max's forehead and stands up. As she flicks off the light, Max calls out. "I love you, mom." Her fingers twist into her blanket, nails picking at the threads.

Susan pauses. "I love you too, Maxie." It's not *Max*, but it's also not

“Hi, Lucas.” It’s a new day, (new day, new day,) and she’s standing behind him at his locker.

Lucas jumps, which makes her smile. He’s such a nerd. Thank goodness she’s around to remind him of it. “Hey, Max.” He looks a bit nervous. Max raises her eyebrows and smiles, taking his hand in his, and he promptly stumbles over his feet. This is how it should be, Max thinks. Lucas’s cheeks are going dark, but the school bell ringing cuts off whatever he may have said.

“Bye,” Max says, pressing a kiss to his cheek, “I’ll see you at recess.”

“Bye,” he calls out when she’s already at the end of the hall, looking dazed, and Max smiles as she waves.

Will presents her with a drawing at lunch, and she stares at it silently, biting her lip. It’s her, pencilled in and permanent, and she grins.

“Will,” she says very seriously, “thank you. I love it.” Will smiles back, still tentative but no longer quite so *small*, and Mike jostles him to the side as he slides down onto the bench beside him.

“Hey, you got a drawing!” Max nods proudly, folding it up carefully and slipping it into her bag. When she gets home, she will put it somewhere where no one can find it. (When she wakes up just past midnight two days later, she’ll pull it out and will be comforted—by herself, by Will, by something unknown. She’ll slip back into sleep for the first time in three weeks.)

“You know what this means, right?” Mike is grinning. “This means you’re officially part of the campaign. No backing out now.” He leans over to high-five Dustin, who’s cackling already, but Max makes eye contact with Will and shrugs.

“Okay,” she allows. “There are worse things to be part of.”

And Dungeons and Dragons actually doesn't sound half bad. Maybe.

The next time she walks into Mike's house, she's laughing, tumbling through the door as soon as it's opened, shouldering past Lucas. "Hey!" His voice is indignant, and Max sticks out a tongue, still laughing, when she realises abruptly that Mike wasn't the one who opened the door. Lucas falters, too, and tries to compose himself. He looks dumb, and Max makes the mental note to remind him of it later.

"Hi, Nancy."

"Hi Lucas." Nancy turns her gaze to Max. "Hey...?"

"Max," Max mumbles, shrinking a bit. Lucas sends her a concerned look, maybe surprised, and she tries not to let it chafe.

"Cool," Nancy replies easily. "I'm Nancy."

Max only barely keeps herself from saying something stupid, like *I know*, and shakes Nancy's hand when it's offered. Max wonders if Mike said something to her, but weirdly, she doesn't mind. "The boys are downstairs," Nancy continues, "and Holly and I are making cookies for later."

"Thanks, Nancy," Lucas says cheerfully, and Nancy raises an eyebrow.

"Who says they were for you?" Her lips are turned up at the corners, though, and Lucas grins. Nancy's really pretty, absurdly pretty. Also, she was the one with that gun back in the Byers house.

Mike suddenly comes spinning around the corner, catching sight of them, and instantly his eyes light up. "Lucas! Max!"

"Hey, weirdo," Lucas answers, rolling his eyes. Nancy closes the front door, heading to the kitchen, and Mike bounces on his toes.

"C'mon," he says, signalling with his hands for them to follow him. "El's here."

Max freezes. Lucas, mid-step, turns to her. "El's here?"

"Yeah," Mike says, still grinning. God, it's sickening how bright he is at even the mention of her name—how must it feel, to care for someone so intensely, so openly? She knows he loves them all, but Eleven is the part of him he was missing. How must it feel, to be tied to someone else like that? Max is torn between longing, (to understand, to feel like that,) and fear. How can he be so secure in letting someone else be his light?

Max chews her lip. Mike tilts his head. "We think you guys should meet," he asks after a pause, uncertain. Is this what she wants to hear? (They, the party, think she, Maxine, should meet El, the famed and re-found.)

"Um," says Max, awkwardly. Her face warms, rosy and raw. "We've met already."

"Not properly," Mike says. "A second meeting. Like ours."

You reached out to me, Max thinks. *I already tried that with her.* "Um," she says instead.

Mike is leaning against the wall, watching her. Lucas hasn't moved. "I don't think she, uh." Her face feels warm and Max hates it. This is who she is, *red hair red blood red words*, and she's not supposed to let a girl she's never met dictate how she feels about herself. That's not how she's supposed to work. "I don't think she likes me."

Mike's eyes are brown and steady. "I didn't like you," he says easily, but his words are careful, chosen and specific for her. "You didn't like Dustin and Lucas." Max chews her lip and feels her fingernails scrape lightly at her palms. "You don't think she likes you? Change her mind, then."

"Prove her wrong," Lucas adds, "show her why we like you so much," and Max feels a swell of something big and creaking fill her chest and expand her ribs, until she feels worryingly large and frighteningly small, all at once.

"I don't owe her anything," Max whispers, her chest still nearly

bursting.

“Of course not, that’s never what we meant. She owes you,” Lucas says. For helping, for trying, for what?

Max turns to Mike, desperate and trying not to show it. “Mike,” she starts. *Mike, if she hates me, will you hate me too? Mike, do you even like me? Mike, why are you trying?*

“Max,” he answers, steady like he never used to be, “If you don’t want this, that’s fine. You can leave. You can let it be. But I think,” and here he pauses, searches her face with something fond in his eyes, “that this time, you’re both ready for this. If you want it.”

Max licks her lips, and her hands itch for someone to hold onto. She turns towards the stairs. There’s laughter, loud, which means it’s either Dustin or Will. There’s light glowing gently at the bottom of the stairwell. There’s a warmth in the air, and a buzz in Max’s heart. *Yeah*, she thinks. *Yeah, I want this*. Max takes a deep breath, clenches and unclenches her fists, and takes the first step.

Author’s Note:

pls review friends! :)